

Nicholas Ray: Still A Rebel With a Cause

By VINCENT CANBY

BINGHAMTON, N.Y. The screening room was leaking. During the night a wash basin on an upper floor had overflowed, leaving a large, drippy patch of ceiling about halfway between the screen and the area where the members of the audience were standing and sitting, on the floor, on chairs and on tables, and sometimes on each other. Someone said there had been a beer party upstairs and no one had been paying attention. In the course of the screening itself, there was hardly a three- or four-minute interval in which one of the five projectors—four 16 millimeters and one Super 8—did not break down, each time prompting Nicholas Ray to call "Cut. Cut," and to ask for a rewind. The showing was also meant to make use of a 35-mm projector but one of the young technicians said that it certainly would blow a fuse.

The screening room, which also functions as a cutting room, classroom and storage room, is in the basement of the Lecture Hall at Harpur College, one of the colleges that make up the State University of New York at Binghamton. Here, for the past year, the man who directed such Hollywood movies as "In A Lonely Place," "The Lusty Men" and "Johnny Guitar"—phenomena that are as much a part of the America of the 1950's as Eisenhower, the Korean War, loafers and James Dean—has been teaching film by making a film.

Ten years after the release of his last commercial movie, "55 Days at Peking," after various aborted efforts to make films in Yugoslavia and Chicago, after rumors of illnesses and personality problems, Nick Ray still looks, behaves and thinks like a man on a set, which the basement room in Binghamton also is from time to time.

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The members of his crew and his cast are students but he doesn't notice this, which is not as much a reflection of his wish not to patronize them (he doesn't) as it is a reflection of his need to take himself seriously. Only his vocabulary is occasionally awkward.

Last week, when he and I arrived at the screening room to look at some footage, the director was seeing a number of his students for the first time since the summer holidays. "What were you doing?" he asked a young man with red hair. "I worked at Coney Island all summer," the red-haired student answered. "I had a watermelon stand." "Did you make much bread?" the director asked gravely. "Yeah," the boy said, then added: "Maybe you should do that." General laughter.

A history of Ray's later career, especially of that part of it that was associated with producer Samuel Bronston, for whom Ray directed "55 Days" and "King of Kings" in Spain, is as much a history of financial crises as it is of cinematic possibilities achieved and squandered. During one of the pauses in the Binghamton screening, I asked him if he still had his house on Syt, the little German island in the North Sea where he was living the last time I'd seen him three years ago. "No," he said, "but I still have my paintings over there. They've been appraised at over half a million dollars and they're trying to take them away from me." "Who?" I asked. "It's a matter of a \$30,000 bank overdraft to which I was perfectly entitled, while I was in Chicago. . . ." The cryptic reference was to the unfinished film about the Chicago Conspiracy Trial he'd been directing (Continued on Page 22)



Director Nicholas Ray
Possibilities squandered?

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Ray—Rebel With a Cause

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two years ago. The screening continued.

When one flies to Binghamton, whose Broome County Airport is like the flight deck of an aircraft carrier (actually it's the sawed-off top of a tame New York mountain), one is struck by the similarity between the rolling, wooded and laked countryside and the countryside surrounding La Crosse, Wis., where Ray and Joseph Losey, another director somewhat bigger in Europe than he is at home, spent their boyhoods before and during World War I.

Binghamton is a city of big industry these days (IBM, Singer, etc.) and Ray describes it as "a hard-hat town," but the air last week was extraordinarily clear and the pace American rural. He has a house at the edge of a forest, with a small, sometimes wild stream below, and he works constantly, which is what he wants to do.

Ray originally came to Binghamton a year ago last May to give a lecture, which went so well that he was invited back to teach in the fall. Under his contract he has another year to go. When he began teaching, he had 35 students in three classes, which he thought was being redundant, so he combined the classes and set everyone to becoming a moviemaker with the equipment at hand, or borrowed or donated. There are no tests as such. He asks his students to read Camus's "The Myth of Sisyphus" and Bergson's essay on "Laughter" and to show up for class. That's all.

Out of the class improvisations, and from a very general outline he wrote when he first came to Binghamton, something called "The Gun Under My Pillow" ("I had premonitions of my own death, and I was reminded of something Thomas Wolfe had written to his editor, Maxwell Perkins."), his new movie is emerging, a movie he hopes will eventually see theatrical distribution.

Although it is being made with very little money, it is technically more ambitious than anything Ray has tried before. If things work out, it will consist of a 35-mm frame into which 16-mm and Super-8 images will be set, not optically in the lab, but via a videotape synthesizer. He calls it "an adventure in time and space," the sort of adventure that commercial directors seldom have time for.

The portions of the film I saw were difficult to disassociate from the conditions under which I saw them. It's about college students who are making a film, who are falling in and out of love, who are reacting to the war, to Nixon, to rock and to drugs, who are solemn and passionate about everything and never very far away

from great cases of giggles, which may be the film's most essential, subversive truth.

As I sat in the leaky screening room, the people in the movie sat there too, passing around a large bottle of beer and a large bottle of white wine. Tom, a central character in the film, really is named Tom and he is, as he says on screen, the son of a New York City Chief of Detectives, but some of the lines he speaks are pure Nick Ray ("My epitaph will read: 'I was interrupted'"). There's a very funny scene of Ray directing a fist fight between a student and himself as if it were a scene with Robert Mitchum and Arthur Kennedy. One of the girls in the movie has the round, beautiful, sullen-sexy face of the young Gloria Grahame, Ray's former wife and the mother of his son Tim, who is now 22 and a composer.

I was more aware of the time-space adventure than I'd thought would be possible, for the film, even though unfinished, breaking down, acted by non-pros, every now and then recalls the controlled, melodramatic density and sheer technique of "They Live By Night" and "Rebel Without A Cause," Hollywood films made by Ray in his palmier days. It contains, among other things, a fight in a swimming pool, between a boy and a girl in love and at loose ends, that is one of the toughest, most dolorous things he's ever shot.

Today, at 61, Ray lives with the young people he had earlier to research. It seems at times that he has disappeared into the chaotic world of the film itself, wearing Levis, a dark blue T-shirt and a light blue windbreaker, and not giving much of a damn whether it's day or night. (Said one student: "We sometimes work 18 hours at a stretch!")

But the past and the outside world are never very far away. "I wonder why Sinatra and that crowd have swung over to Nixon," he asked himself at one point. Talking about his attempts to raise money for his work at Binghamton, he told about his unsuccessful efforts to contact Howard Hughes, who had been his friend and the owner of RKO when Ray was under contract to that studio. "You try to reach Howard and somebody immediately puts out a check on you," he said ruefully, and he remembered how Hollywood dinner dates, which had been canceled after the bad reviews of "Johnny Guitar," were reinstated when the film became a big money-maker. The ways of that world haven't changed in his book. Not long ago Ray telephoned the executor of his estate. What happened? Ray looked away. "He didn't take the call," he said.